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# **The Quest for Fictionality: Prostitution and Metatextuality in Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénus***

*Steven Wilson*

In the mid to late nineteenth century in France, the contrived textuality of realism and naturalism came under increasing scrutiny owing to its limited capacity to articulate the destruction, pain, purposelessness, fragmentation, alienation and *ennui* that often characterised modern life. As a response to the inadequacies inherent in existing novelistic forms, modern formal experiments in narrative structure, technique and language combined to offer an innovative aesthetic experience that not only challenged dominant social and cultural forces but strove to resist and overcome the instrumentality of what had come before. The aesthetic energies of what became known as modernism are often associated with the decadent tropes in Baudelaire's poetry, as well as with the work of Flaubert who, with characteristic ironic distance, famously declared that he wanted to write 'un livre sur rien'. This article focuses instead on the contribution made by one of France's most idiosyncratic fin-de-siècle woman writers, the polemical Rachilde. Labelled an 'androgynous', 'hermaphrodite' and 'pervert', Rachilde finds herself situated within a lineage of male authors stretching from Sade and Laclos to Gide and Proust, via Baudelaire, Rimbaud and Lautréamont (Finch 206). Revelling in 'deviant' sexual practices, destruction and the macabre, her subordination of literary convention and gender norms is one of the hallmarks of both her life and fiction. Governed by a spirit of independent self-determination and a desire to upset hegemonic norms of propriety, Rachilde mobilised the values inherent in art and aesthetic retreat in response to a stifling *doxa* of narrative cohesion, unified structure and mimetic representation of political, social and sexual norms. Rachilde regarded the ideologies underpinning such narratives as outmoded and designed in large part to validate patriarchal discursive categories including procreation and the family.

Illustrative of her desire to challenge hegemonies, Rachilde, who described herself as an 'homme de lettres' on her name-cards, famously proclaimed that Zola had 'imposé à l'art le bandeau de la raison' (quoted in Dauphiné 65). She aligned herself with the experimental self-styled decadent movement which

celebrated what Verlaine termed, in an allusion to Huysmans's masterpiece, 'une littérature éclatant par un temps de décadence, non pour marcher dans le pas de son époque, mais bien tout "à rebours", pour s'insurger contre' (quoted in McGuinness 6). Rachilde's embrace of a decadent aesthetic – manifested in a refusal of nature, a fascination with perversion, the androgynous ideal, the morbid side of love and, crucially, the pleasure afforded by artifice – led Maurice Barrès to baptise her 'Mademoiselle Baudelaire' in his preface to the 1889 edition of *Monsieur Vénus*. While it has become axiomatic that Rachilde translates her defiant pursuit of the logic of excess (as opposed to 'reason') into a central thematic concern of her fiction, her novels are commonly read for their unlimited freedom and experimentation in respect of the portrayal of gender identity and masculine norms of language. As Michael Finn has noted, there is an 'insistent emphasis on sexuality in Rachilde's works' (160). However, this article takes a broader view of Rachilde's contribution to French modernism by examining the ways in which she reshapes the fictional form with a narrative self-consciousness that builds on the anti-realist poetics of her literary predecessors. The argument will focus quite deliberately on the representation of prostitution in her work, particularly *Monsieur Vénus* (1884), in a bid to draw attention to the ways in which a decadent female author's bold rewriting of this most classic nineteenth-century male-authored narrative plot – often concerned with the control and containment of perceived sexual 'excess' or 'deviance' – conveys not only a sense of literary experimentalism but also an overarching concern with what Robert Scholes terms 'fabulation', 'not a turning away from reality but an attempt to find more subtle correspondences between the reality which is fiction and the fiction which is reality' (8).

### **The Erotics and Aesthetics of Prostitution**

Building on the well-established intersections between erotic and aesthetic discourses in decadent texts, Diana Holmes asserts that desire in Rachilde's fiction, though sexual in nature, 'stands for a hunger that transcends the erotic' (101).<sup>1</sup> Baudelaire's oft-cited allusion, 'Qu'est-ce que l'art? Prostitution'

1 Melanie Hawthorne and Liz Constable also write about 'blurring of aesthetic and erotic experience' in Rachilde (xxii), while Hannah Thompson has analysed the relationship between Rachilde's heroines and the objects – both animate and inanimate – which surround them, arguing that the displacement of desire onto decorative accessories (flowers, clothing, jewellery and ornaments) suggests that art and artifice are the privileged means for evoking the 'nature of unspeakable female pleasure' in Rachilde's writings (30).

(1247) – an aestheticisation which distances prostitution from the base realities of corporeal exchange and elevates it instead to the status of art – neatly illustrates the shared ideals of the poet and the so-called ‘Reine des Décadents’. Thus, a reappraisal of Rachilde’s particular representations of prostitution is all the more pertinent in the light of Elaine Showalter’s claim that:

In decadent writing, women are seen as bound to Nature and the material world because they are more physical than men, more body than spirit. They appear as objects of value only when they are aestheticised as corpses or phallicised as *femmes fatales*. [...] Women writers needed to rescue female sexuality from the decadents’ images of romantically doomed prostitutes or devouring Venus flytraps, and represent female desire as a creative force in artistic imagination as well as in biological reproduction. (x–xi)

Rachilde’s refusal of the Baudelairean conception of the ‘éternel féminin’ clearly problematizes her (denigrating) status as ‘Mademoiselle Baudelaire’. Within this critical context, this article proposes consideration of the representation of prostitution by the only *femme-auteur* of the androcentric Decadent movement of the 1880s and 1890s, for Rachilde’s singular status as woman writer and female decadent allows her to re-write some of the orthodox narrative representations Showalter points to above.<sup>2</sup> While the argument that follows will support the idea that the trope of prostitution in Rachilde’s work extends beyond mere erotic significance, it does so by rescuing Rachilde’s prostitutes from obscurity in a critical field dominated by studies of male-authored accounts.<sup>3</sup> The paucity of critical discourse on female-authored narratives of prostitution conspires to perpetuate time-sanctified readings of the prostitute as a textually-repressed fantasy construct, silenced by (male) narrative authority and subjugation. As Carol Mossman puts it: ‘While the copious male-authored fiction and documentation treating the subject does certainly offer insights into the lot of the prostitute, these representations are nonetheless coloured by complex cultural and individual baggage’ (13).

Rachilde views prostitution as an important vector for considering the tensions between fantasy, illusion and reality, not least in the decadent spirit

2 An important reference point is provided by Liane de Pougy whose semi-autobiographical novels on prostitution – including *L’Insaissable* (1898), *Myrrhille* (1899), *Idylle saphique* (1901) and *Ecce Homo* (1903) – document the suffering, depression, misery and dissatisfaction that characterise the life of the supposedly high-class prostitute and chart various fantastical attempts to escape from such de-idealised realities. For further discussion on textual representations of the self in Pougy’s work and the ways in which these resist dominant narrative structures of the fin de siècle, see Mesch 44–59.

3 Noting ‘the absence of any discussion of prostitutional fictions [...] by women’ in his study of representations of prostitution in nineteenth-century France, Charles Bernheimer declares that the ‘prostitutional activity’ of the protagonists in women’s writing ‘seems to carry little fantasmatic investment’ (6).

of the fin de siècle where such forces act as decisive cultural and aesthetic determinants. She uses the motif to establish some noteworthy connections between erotics and aesthetics which serve as a precursor to problematizing boundaries between the virtual and the 'real'. Thus, in the author's fictional world, prostitution gives access to a richly evocative *paradis artificiel* in which fantasy, creativity, narcissism and perversions (in the sense of 'pleasure without function', as defined by Rita Felski (201)) are the gratifying rewards. For instance, *L'Heure sexuelle*, published under the pseudonym of Jean de Chilra in 1898, is Rachilde's imaginary tale of the eccentric writer Louis Rogès who lives out his 'fantaisie d'être aimé par Cléopâtre [...] déguisée en putain moderne' (198). In a bid to escape the mediocrity of modern Paris, the insomniac Rogès fixates on the bust of Cleopatra he has brought back from a recent visit to the Far East so that he might relive the exalted pleasures of the Orient. In the crafted effigy which, Pygmalion-like, becomes endowed with life, Rogès sees 'la reine des cruelles luxures' (8); the mythical figure in Rachilde's account sits naked atop an elephant as she examines the aftermath of a bloody battle scene. However, taking to the streets of modern Paris, Rogès encounters the prostitute Léonie in whom he identifies a reincarnation of Caesar's mistress: 'Cette fille me suggère Cléopâtre comme le petit buste de chez moi réfléchirait cette fille si j'allais le regarder maintenant' (17). Yet he declines any form of physical exchange with the prostitute, for through her he seeks only the possibility of living out his fantasy of an 'amour de tête' (78) with Cleopatra, who is reflected in the prostitute's eyes: 'Oh! Le masque de Cléopâtre derrière lequel me guettent les véritables yeux de la véritable reine!' (25).<sup>4</sup> Léonie is further described as 'une chimère' (27) and 'une forme de fantôme, un corps de reine momifié' (207). These references to the prostitute as hallucination, ghostly spectre and embalmed, mummified corpse encapsulate, in their own way, the tensions between the imaginary and the real that lie at the heart of Rachilde's novel. Contrived and illusory, the prostitute is neither real nor natural; instead, she is a poetic creation, a fantastical construct borne of the writer Rogès's imagination.

The representation of prostitution in *L'Heure sexuelle* sets the scene for a reflection on two of the most common cultural manifestations of decadence in Rachilde's work: sexual non-conformism and the cult of artifice. The equiv-

4 The reference to a 'mask' occulting the 'reality' of the prostitute's body, and the fact that the prostitute is valued not for corporeal exchange but for her artificial qualities, recalls the imagery used in Baudelaire's 'L'Amour du mensonge' in which 'la vérité' of the prostitute's natural corporeality is overcome by accentuating the aesthetic qualities of her embellished appearance: 'Mais ne suffit-il pas que tu sois l'apparence, / Pour réjouir un cœur qui fuit la vérité? / Qu'importe ta bêtise ou ton indifférence? / Masque ou décor, salut! J'adore ta beauté' (95).

alences Rachilde establishes between prostitution and artistic fantasy in this text are enhanced in what I shall now argue is a more sustained coupling of the erotic and the aesthetic in the author's 'assez abominable' *Monsieur Vénus*, a novel whose title announces a clear desire to upset dominant conventional orders of gender representation (Barrès, 'Complications' 5). From the outset, fixed gender identities in the narrative are problematised. The artist Jacques Silvert, working in his sister's flower shop, is encoded as feminine: 'Autour de son torse, sur sa blouse flottante, courait en spirale une guirlande de roses; des roses fort larges de satin chair velouté de grenat, qui lui passait entre les jambes, filait jusqu'aux épaules et venait s'enrouler au col' (8). His sexual vulnerability is exploited by the cross-dressing Raoule de Vénérande who forms a relationship with Jacques in which she declares, 'de nous deux, le plus homme c'est toujours moi' (85).<sup>5</sup> In their sexual metamorphosis, in which Jacques becomes ever more feminine and Raoule increasingly virile, the couple create then live out 'un amour tout neuf' (72). The sexual politics of *Monsieur Vénus* lead Holmes to note that the text 'is worthy of feminist interest because in its deliberately shocking melodramatic excesses it reverses, parodies and thus exhibits the "normal" politics of gender, and presents gender identity as fluid, constructed, anything but essential' (120). Maryline Lukacher and Melanie Hawthorne similarly argue that the fluidity of gender in Rachilde's work premises the search for a new 'sexual and intellectual identity' (Lukacher 119) in which gender is cerebral, 'not a biological category but a matter of symbolic positioning' (Hawthorne 173). While these analyses remain significant and are frequently studied within the theoretical framework established by Judith Butler's theories of gender 'trouble' and performance,<sup>6</sup> the (meta)textual reverberation of prostitution in *Monsieur Vénus* is a critically neglected field of enquiry, even though Rachilde uses prostitution's association with the themes of fabrication, illusion and artifice in order to reflect on the relationship between life, language and fictional constructs.

The fact that Raoule is the active, paying consumer in her first transaction with Jacques in the opening scene of *Monsieur Vénus* sets a symbolic precedent. Jacques is initially presented as a temporary stand-in for his absent florist sister, Marie Silvert, declaring to Raoule that he is there 'pour vous servir' (14). Taken by his passivity and his feminine association with roses, she codifies him as 'un bel instrument de plaisir' (19), his malleability seemingly a catalyst for the realisation of her sexual fantasies. As their relationship progresses

5 Raoule's sexual role reversal and quest to transcend the binary system of sexual identification marks her out as a key figure of decadent aesthetics. For further details on the figure of the androgyne in the decadent aesthetic, see Monneyron.

6 For Holmes, Rachilde's text is 'Butlerian *avant la lettre*' (3).

and Raoule adroitly manipulates the vulnerable young man to the service of her desires, Jacques becomes increasingly objectified, ceding his body to the woman he now describes as his 'chère bienfaitrice' (35) in a term that underscores not only commodification of the body but the control that results from financial power. As Laurence Porter suggests: 'Jacques is a poor working-class man whom [Raoule] buys' (106). That said, the economic dynamics of the relationship entail more existential consequences that bear upon the gender identification of each protagonist. The narrator informs us that:

Une vie étrange commença pour Raoule de Vénérande, à partir de l'instant fatal où Jacques Silvert, lui cédant sa puissance d'homme amoureux, devint sa chose, une sorte d'être inerte qui se laissait aimer parce qu'il aimait lui-même d'une façon impuissante. Car Jacques aimait Raoule avec un vrai cœur de femme. Il aimait par reconnaissance, par soumission, par un besoin latent de voluptés inconnues. (94)

The lexicon of commodification that characterises such descriptions of Jacques's body is coupled with Raoule's symbolic positioning as erotic consumer in their relationship: 'Tu ne seras pas mon amant... [...] Tu seras mon esclave, Jacques, si l'on peut appeler esclavage l'abandon délicieux que tu me feras de ton corps', she tells him (88–89). In this way, the relationship becomes defined in terms of prostitution, whereby the paying consumer initiates a series of fantasies with the sexually submissive other. As Giselle d'Estoc puts it in her contemporaneous critique of 'ce type nouveau de l'homme-femme résigné au rôle d'une fille et celui des viragos qui changent de sexe', Jacques's passivity not only feminises him but reduces him to the role of 'homme-prostituée' (quoted in Bollhayer Mayer 92). Thus, to go back to the beginning of the novel when the stand-in Jacques tells Raoule, upon her visit to his absent sister's shop, that '[p]our le moment, Marie Silvert, c'est moi' (9), the apparently innocent comment denotes much more than what Hawthorne and Constable term 'the extent to which [Jacques] assumes a feminine identity' (*Monsieur Vénus* 9, note 5). The potent symbolism of the scene resides instead in the fact that Marie Silvert in Rachilde's text is herself a prostitute.<sup>7</sup>

7 Jacques is also revealed to be 'le fils d'un ivrogne et d'une catin' in one of the naturalist incursions evident in Rachilde's text (43). The point is reinforced when the narrator later exclaims: 'La prostitution, c'est une maladie! Tous l'avaient eue dans sa famille: sa mère, sa sœur; est-ce qu'il pouvait lutter contre son propre sang?...' (204). However, comparisons with Zola's prostitute, tainted by her biological inheritance, are somewhat unproductive, as shall be explained below.

### Prostitution and (inter)textuality

Raoule, who had bought 'un être qu'elle méprisait comme homme et adorait comme *beauté*' (75; emphasis in original), appears to appreciate the creative potential and aesthetic traits typical of decadent prostitute figures who manage to transcend their natural corporeality. In this sense, Jacques's value – his exchange value in Raoule's marketplace of desire – is both artistic and fantasmatic: functioning as 'une bonne œuvre' (21), he is the artistic stimulus for 'la réalisation d'un projet' (27). However, Raoule's experiment with Jacques soon begins to go wrong. Given that the orthodox balance of power between the sexes is described in *Monsieur Vénus* as a commonplace form of prostitution in which 'l'homme possède, la femme subit' and 'la femme se prostitue aux conceptions paradisiaques [de l'homme]' (92), Raoule's relationship with Jacques turns into the very prototype it is originally designed to disrupt, albeit that gender roles are switched. Described as an 'homme entretenu' (111), Jacques, 'cette putain travestie' (81), who lies on 'le lit de Vénus' (193) like a 'courtisane qui attend l'amant' (179), adheres to a model of sexual power relations supposedly rejected in the text. The reference to 'le lit de Vénus' invites associations between Rachilde's prostitute and Zola's infamous 'blonde Vénus' in the *Rougon-Macquart* series. Margaret Cohen, for instance, has argued that there is a comparison to be made between Nana, who drives her suitors mad and 'the golden beast of *Monsieur Vénus* [...], Jacques Silvert', catalyst of Raoule's hysteria (69). While Cohen proposes that the re-gendered Nana of Rachilde's text allows the writer to wage an attack on 'the realist slippage between the truth of social relations and the mysteries of feminine sexuality' (69), it is important to note that Jacques possesses very few of the irredeemably subversive characteristics that typify Zola's devouring whore. If anything, the overlaps between Nana, the devil incarnate of Zola's fiction, and Raoule – of whom the narrator comments, 'cette créature était le diable' (36) – are more symbolic as these two transgressive female figures fall outside the religious binary of 'ou nonne, ou monstre' (27) articulated by the young, typically conservative, doctor brought in by Raoule's religious Tante Ermengarde to pronounce on her niece's hysteria.

When Raoule declares that she is to 'rehabilitate' her prostitute-lover by marrying him, *Monsieur Vénus* begins to read like another important nineteenth-century narrative of prostitution, namely the outmoded plot of redemption which stresses the prostitute's potential for transformation from vice to virtue through love, a trajectory favoured by Romantic writers such as Alexandre Dumas fils in *La Dame aux Camélias* (1848). Appropriating the discourse of restitution, Raoule tells Jacques: 'Je ferai de toi mon mari. [...] Je te réhabilite. Quoi de plus simple! Notre amour n'est qu'une dégradante



torture que tu subis parce que je te paye. Eh bien, je te rends ta liberté' (112). Although the prostitute in this 'amour tout neuf' is Jacques, the male partner, the marriage of prostitute to client in an effort to efface the stigma attached to the former serves to highlight one of the more obvious contradictions of Rachilde's work, for marriage is also represented in *Monsieur Vénus* as a proxy for prostitution: 'L'honnête épouse, au moment où elle se livre à son honnête époux, est dans la même position que la prostituée au moment où elle se livre à son amant' (108). In this sense, Rachilde's text seemingly takes its place in a narrative lineage stretching back to writers as different as Balzac and Sand in the early part of the nineteenth century, both of whom articulate views of marriage and prostitution as equally imprisoning states. In Sand's *Lélia* (1833), for instance, 'amante, courtisane et mère' are identified as the 'trois conditions de la destinée des femmes auxquelles nulle femme n'échappe, soit qu'elle se vende par un marché de prostitution ou par un contrat de mariage' (153); in Balzac's *La Femme de trente ans* (1842), marriage is presented as a patriarchal institution that grants a husband his freedom but binds the wife into a life of duty and blind submission. As Julie, la Marquise d'Aiglemont, puts it in Balzac's text, 'Hé bien, le mariage, tel qu'il se pratique aujourd'hui, me semble être une prostitution légale' (ii, 1114).

The intertextual associations between *Monsieur Vénus* and narratives of prostitution by Balzac, Sand, Dumas fils or Zola allow us to situate Rachilde within the cultural and literary developments of her time. Yet it is in the links she establishes between prostitution and artifice that we find evidence of Rachilde's singular creative aspiration and textual inventiveness. The exaggerated gender reversals in *Monsieur Vénus* highlight the artificiality of language and, by extension, the coded nature of constructed representations of sexuality in literature. Linguistic gender agreements are distorted and highlighted using italics on the page, such as when Raoule reveals to her suitor Raittolbe that she is '*amoureux d'un homme*' (74) or, when urging Jacques to look at himself in the mirror, she admires an ambiguous, bi-gendered beauty: 'Tu es si beau, chère créature, que tu es plus belle que moi!' (88). Experimentation in respect of gender representation in language is indissociable from the transgression of textual norms in Rachilde's novel. Indeed, as Dorothy Kelly has pointed out, 'this text [...] alludes in a strange way to the artificial nature of its own textuality' (153). In a novel that explores the decadent artifice not only of gender and language, but (in that it makes a virtue of fictionality) of literature too, Rachilde's representations of prostitution radically question some of the most hackneyed representations of sexuality typically found in nineteenth-century narratives. However, the self-awareness concerning language and form we find in *Monsieur Vénus* is significant for a more important reason still, for, as I shall now argue, it invites us to read the text through

the critical lens of metafiction, a self-reflective, self-aware form of fictional writing which, as Patricia Waugh has demonstrated, 'self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality' (2).

### **Prostitution and Metafiction**

It is, of course, axiomatic that one of the functions of language is to construct and mediate our experience of the world and its apparent realities. However, it is precisely the authenticity of such received wisdom, the coherence of seemingly stable representations, that metafiction challenges. As Waugh states: 'If our knowledge of this world is now seen to be mediated through language, then literary fiction (worlds constructed entirely of fiction) becomes a useful model for learning about the construction of "reality" itself' (3). In *Monsieur Vénus*, in which the textual representation of the 'amour tout neuf' between Jacques and Raoule overtly flaunts the conditions of its artifice through the creation of alternative linguistic structures, it is not simply the case that social convention is resisted. Instead, through a self-conscious scrutiny of the artificially coded nature of language, what we bear witness to is a bold exploration of the possible fictionality of the external world, whose structures and eternal 'truths' are but a series of contrived, impermanent conventions, and whose effect is to reinforce perpetually the status quo. What if, Rachilde implicitly asks us in her literary creation of a prostitutional fantasy, the world outside the fictional text were equally fictional? What if all conceptions of objective reality normally conveyed through language were revealed to be an illusion, or, worse still, a human fabrication? What if the words supposedly used to mediate reality suddenly had no utility function and were simply *words*? And what, then, if the language of literature, which classically refers us to the seemingly real human world, were rewritten and fiction refused its status as transparent window onto an external reality but dared, instead, to revel in its very fictionality? By questioning the ways in which the 'reality' of the world is written or constructed in fiction, *Monsieur Vénus* not only undermines the order and certainties of reality, and in the process invalidates the literary imperative for verisimilitude; it also celebrates fictionality as no more, but certainly no less, of a reality than the external human world as portrayed in those literary works that have a propensity towards realism. As Rachilde herself contended, the only true 'libérateurs du nouveau siècle' were 'les démolisseurs' and '[les] esthètes', who recognised that 'la raison, le positivisme, le monde rationnel créé par Monsieur Zola, ça pouvait bien aussi ne pas exister' (Rachilde's emphasis; quoted in McGuinness 6). Rachilde's

attempts to explore the tensions and boundaries between fantasy and reality in *Monsieur Vénus* thus fulfil the two fundamental requirements of metafiction: 'the construction of a fictional illusion [...] and the laying bare of that illusion'. In this way, the metafictional novel becomes a text whose effect is 'simultaneously to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction' (Waugh 6). While *Monsieur Vénus* is, of course, a work of fiction, part of its textual force derives from its suggestion that the world outside the novel may also just be a web of fiction.

How, in this context, to find meaning? In a novel that questions and challenges gender representations, toys with convention and parodies literary procedures, *Monsieur Vénus* underpins its fictionality by making of Raoule the novelist's surrogate in a fictional world. In her attempt to inscribe a fantasy relationship – one which does not adhere to stifling conventions of sexual representation and identity but instead allows for personal autonomy – in an idealised textual form, Raoule sets about the task of creating a narrative that will give her life form and meaning through self-identification as the writer of a fictional, fantasmatic text: 'Il est certain [...] que j'ai eu des amants', she says. 'Des amants dans ma vie comme j'ai des livres dans ma bibliothèque, pour savoir, pour étudier... Mais je n'ai pas eu de passion, je n'ai pas écrit mon livre, moi!' (70–71). For Holmes, Raoule's 'book' is 'her relationship with Jacques', for 'through it she reinvents both herself and what she calls "love"' (118). However, Jacques is, as we have seen, described on several occasions as 'une bonne œuvre', emphasising the aesthetic and textual qualities attributed to his *body*. We read that '[son] corps était un poème' (126), suggesting that Raoule – as interdiegetic writer – conceptualises Jacques's body in terms of a textual surface on which to create her own personal, perverted realities out of art. If, for Rachilde, prostitution represents creative fantasy and artifice, then Jacques, Raoule's prostitute-text, acts as the textually embodied expression of aesthetic experimentation, and *Monsieur Vénus*, like all metafictional works, asserts its commitment to 'the idea of constructed meanings rather than representable essences' (Currie 15).

Such a form of textuality, embedded in the layers of Rachilde's narrative, offers parallels with her very own artistic aspirations to distort linguistic codes and enact decadent tropes of reversal in her fantasies of perversion. Indeed, Raoule's 'book' – the prostitute-body of her desires – suggests that we should not simply read the infringement of linguistic codes, the exposure of artifice and the exaggerations of sexual instability in *Monsieur Vénus* in terms of a crisis of literary forms and conventions which cannot adequately mediate the experience of modern reality in all its plurality and impermanence. Instead, a critical reading of the final form – the published state – of Raoule's prostitute-text invites us once again to analyse the hallmark of fictionality as one

of the most significant and positively creative leitmotifs running through Rachilde's novel and to view it as a decadent response to the exhaustion of traditional literary forms. When Jacques is killed by the Baron de Raittolbe in the classic masculine rite of the duel of honour (insisted upon by Raoule given the offence these two caused her by becoming attracted to each other), he becomes, quite literally, an artificial object of desire:

Sur la couche en forme de conque, gardée par un Eros de marbre, repose un mannequin de cire revêtu d'un épiderme en caoutchouc transparent. Les cheveux roux, les cils blonds, le duvet d'or de la poitrine sont naturels; les dents qui ornent la bouche, les ongles des mains et des pieds ont été arrachés à un cadavre. Les yeux en émail ont un adorable regard. (209)

The novel's principal prostitute figure, a synthetic combination of wax mannequin with various 'real' bodily parts attached, functions ultimately as the very embodiment of fictionality; moreover, it is precisely Raoule's role as inventive writer that allows her to celebrate the power of her fictional construct. Given that it privileges phantasmagoria over corporeal exchange, Raoule's mechanical simulacrum, the prostitute-body of *Monsieur Vénus*, reasserts the value of artifice as a decadent aesthetic which allows for the transcendence of utility, reality, reason, nature and sexual purpose. Put simply, it serves as a bold contention that there is no more meaningful reality than art or fiction. As a result, the tantalising connections Rachilde posits between prostitution, fantasy and fictional constructs in *Monsieur Vénus* shed important light on the symbolism and significance of the motif of prostitution in the novel. The representation of prostitution and its simulation of artificial states in Rachilde's work allow for a celebration of relativity, uniqueness, excess and aesthetic freedom as affirming counter-reactions to the social and literary tyranny of convention, reason, logic, stability and propriety. In an effort to re-inscribe the prostitute both in and as fiction, *Monsieur Vénus* proudly serves as the epitome of metafiction's great objective, whereby, as Waugh puts it, 'the fictional quest [is] transformed into a quest for fictionality' (10).

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